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ROBERT GATES

By JOSEPH VOLZ

News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON—Robert Gates, the career CIA official nominated yesterday to succeed William Casey as director of the embattled spying agency, has never been assigned to the "dirty tricks" division—and that may be his biggest asset.

"Dirty tricks," spy jargon for covert operations such as secret Iran arms deals or supposedly secret support of rebels in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan, is in bad repute these days on Capitol Hill as a result of the Iran-Contra scandal.

Gates, 43, unlike several previous CIA directors such as Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby and Casey himself, has limited his spying to the "clean" side of the business—research and analysis.

Named deputy CIA director last summer, Gates wins high marks on Capitol Hill as a level-headed, demanding official who is an avid reader of the intelligence product prepared by his subordinates.

Gates also spent six years in the Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter administrations on the National Security Council staff in the days before John Poindexter and Oliver North launched their own covert operations that burgeoned into the Iran-Contra mess.

Gates has testified before Congress that he ordered the CIA's lawyers to review every aspect of the Iran project to make sure the CIA was not doing anything illegal.